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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 9th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KITTIKHOUN (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 87: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (A/51/21, 372 and 406)

1. Mr. SAI (Algeria), speaking as Rapporteur of the Committee on Information and introducing its report (A/51/21), said that at its eighteenth session in May 1996 the Committee had adopted two draft resolutions by consensus (sect. IV of the report). Draft resolution A on information in the service of humanity called for, inter alia, the establishment of a new world information and communication order in view of the disparities existing between developed and developing countries; cooperation in reducing the disparities and enhanced efforts to strengthen the communication capacities of the developing countries; ensuring the free and effective performance by journalists of their professional tasks; supporting the continuation and strengthening of practical training programmes for journalists in the developing world; and providing full support for the International Programme for the Development of Communication of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Draft resolution B on United Nations public information policies and activities contained a number of recommendations to improve the operation of the Department of Public Information, such as requesting the Secretary-General to give the Department his support, in view of the reduction of its resources, and calling upon the Department itself to become more involved in the planning of peacekeeping operations. The resolution also called for a review of the question of the Department's publications; stressed the importance of ensuring the best possible functioning of United Nations information centres in all parts of the world, taking note of the great development of new communication technologies and the role played by the information centres in disseminating information about United Nations activities; took note of the contribution made by Member States in the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, with a view to enhancing world public awareness of the consequences of such disasters; and recognized the positive role of regional seminars for the promotion of independent and pluralistic media, noting a UNESCO proposal to organize such a seminar in Bulgaria in 1997 for Central and Eastern Europe. It should be noted that a climate of cooperation, consultation coordination had prevailed throughout the work of the Committee on Information and its Extended Bureau.

2. Mr. SANBAR (Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information), presenting the Secretary-General's report (A/51/406) on the information activities of the United Nations, emphasized the current economic constraints.

3. He said that, in today's information age, both the public and the private sector were dedicating ever-increasing resources to all aspects of the production and consumption of information. For the United Nations, the response of international organizations was of most interest, because they recognized that information was of prime importance for sustaining the public's interest in and support for their activities. Recent international events had affected the public's perception of international organizations, resulting in a general dissatisfaction with international development cooperation. The trend had seriously affected all international organizations, and especially development agencies. The response of international organizations needed to be aimed at

such perceptions, and more energy and increase resources therefore needed to be devoted to information activities. In a democratic world, public opinion represented a driving force behind the elaboration of government policies, and international organizations had to take that into account when developing their information policies and activities.

4. The Committee should examine the difficult financial situation of the Department of Information from that viewpoint. For the current year, its budget had been cut by nearly 9 per cent and over 9 per cent of vacant positions had not been filled. The Department was doing more with less; however, increasing demands were being made on it as a result of the growing role of the Organization in peacekeeping and peacemaking, sustainable development, social justice, and democratization, and there was a limit beyond which the already reduced resources would not stretch.

5. An open United Nations was crucial to mobilizing support for the Organization. To that end, the Department was endeavouring to strengthen partnerships. An important recent trend was the active participation of a growing number of permanent representatives and members of their missions in the United Nations public information strategy, drawing on their experience and their stature to respond, advocate and inspire.

6. Another emerging trend was the growing involvement of key private individuals and the academic and business communities in various aspects of United Nations work. The Department had arranged for meetings with over 100 chief executives of some of the largest corporations and most prominent political societies to present United Nations activities and explore ways of joint advocacy of its position.

7. Public interest in the activities of the United Nations continued to grow, and the greatest challenge was to transform that interest into better public understanding and, ultimately, greater public support. The development of a media culture at all levels of the Organization was an integral part of the process.

8. In its effort to reach new audiences, the Department was trying to forge closer relationships with all constituents of civil society as potential supporters of new initiatives in the field of public information. Strong partnerships with the media and other key re-disseminators also remained essential.

9. The Department had enhanced a service for monitoring and analysing media coverage of the United Nations. It was also planning to make full use of the opportunities offered by new computer technologies to disseminate products such as UN Positive, an electronic newsletter which highlighted the Organization's accomplishments as portrayed in the media, UN NewsWatch, a column that would challenge the negative aspects of media treatment while drawing attention to instances of balanced coverage, and UN CyberGuide, a column drawing attention to sites that contained information about the United Nations, particularly those that promoted a better understanding of the Organization. Another new initiative, Setting the Record Straight, was widely used by all the

Organization's offices and the principal newspapers around the world in positive comments on the United Nations.

10. The growing interdependence of television, computers and telecommunications offered vast new possibilities for developing new audiences everywhere. In that regard, the Department, in cooperation with Italian authorities, was organizing a United Nations Television Forum to be held at Headquarters in November 1996. The United Nations would be a catalyst between communicators of diverse cultures as over 100 broadcasting executives and national and international opinion makers would attend, at no cost to the regular budget.

11. During the period under review, the Department had focused on specific issues with a view to cost efficiency. While targeting audiences through traditional media, it had pioneered a fourth: information technology.

12. The Organization was reaching its widest audience ever through television. It was a regular partner in the CNN World Report and its weekly television news magazine item UN in Action was distributed to over 100 countries and was accessible to well over 100 million viewers. No Place To Hide, the video on peacekeeping, had recently been shown on television in some 22 Member States.

13. Outreach through radio had been widened. All the Department's radio production and dissemination resources had recently been consolidated into a single service, resulting in gains in efficiency and cost-effective delivery. At the same time, the radio studios had been upgraded with digital audio workstations.

14. The Department's approach of using low-cost technology to reach wider audiences was characterized by its use of the Internet for delivery and dissemination of radio programmes, with the advantage of reaching out to both individuals and broadcasting stations. Internet was also being used for the dissemination of the Department's press releases. Previously, information on daily developments at the United Nations had been obtainable only at briefing meetings; now such information was available by telephone.

15. Taking full advantage of advances in visual broadcasting technology, the Department had recently introduced video-conferencing to link participants in United Nations events located at different duty stations.

16. One of the most exciting recent developments had been the redesign and expansion of the United Nations "home page" on the World Wide Web. In addition to posting information, the Department was increasingly playing a coordination role as more departments and offices developed their own material. The number of visits to the web site had tripled over the past six months, and continued to rise. Interest in the Internet had led to Cyberseek, a hands-on workshop for missions and members of delegations, organized on an ongoing basis since June.

17. The Internet was also being used to generate revenue for the Organization. A "home page" for sales publications had recently been launched. In the same way, the successful merger of the World Bank publication International Business Opportunities with Development Business was being followed by a new electronic product which would make the data available online and earlier than the printed

product, with a fully searchable database. Development Business online was being financed by the increased revenue from the merger and would be available early in 1997.

18. In the current budgetary environment, the Department had had to rely on the creativity and resourcefulness of its staff to meet the challenge and firmly establish the United Nations presence on the Internet. Numerous positive comments on the quality and timeliness of information posted on the United Nations web site had been received from both inside and outside the Organization. Information technology not only saved costs, but also ensured two essential requirements of public information: speed and wider outreach.

19. Traditional media could not be overlooked, not only because of limited access to the Internet in developing countries, but even in the industrialized countries the mainstream of the targeted audience was reached only through traditional means.

20. Although public information components of peacekeeping operations were not part of the Department's authority, it continued to help improve the public information capacity of peacekeeping and other field missions. In addition to initiatives pursued through an interdepartmental working group chaired by the Department, it was working closely with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to examine the public information "lessons learned" from recent operations, to try and build on the experience gained when planning new operations. The remarkable effectiveness of radio was one of the important lessons recently learned.

21. The Department provided substantive promotion of development issues, and its units had effectively channelled material from the major international conferences. The decision had been made to continue publication of Development Update. Initially, it had been designed to supplement publicity programmes for the cycle of world conferences on development issues, and the Department was examining options to enable it to address wider aspects of economic and social development issues. With regard to such issues, the Department continued to organize a variety of events around the international days declared by the General Assembly and the results of the series of international conferences.

22. The Department had joined efforts with the United Nations Children's Fund to prepare for the upcoming release of the report entitled The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. The United Nations Youth Forum, to be held in Vienna in late November, had been another focus of activities, in cooperation with the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. Work had also been initiated on an information programme in connection with the five-year review of the Earth Summit.

23. The Department had continued to strengthen its outreach to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as principal actors in civil society. The annual NGO conference held under the theme "The United Nations: Facing the Challenges of the Changing World", had attracted more than 1,450 representatives of 514 organizations from 59 Member States and discussed broad-based proposals for the reform of the Organization. In addition, for the first time, United Nations

information services and information centres in various countries held parallel events with local non-governmental organizations.

24. Nearly 40 million visitors had taken the guided tour since its inception in 1952. Posters had been placed in airports in New York, Chicago and Atlanta on a pro bono basis, and a visit to the United Nations was now an integral part of any tour of New York. Recorded information on the tour was available in nine languages, and plans were under way to upgrade the computer reservation system to include billing operations, statistical reports, staff scheduling and elements related to briefing programmes. While the tour remained one of the most immediate ways of reaching the public, restrictions on the number of people per group for security reasons and the resulting increase in operating costs were negatively affecting the Department's ability to generate revenue. Unless the situation was corrected, it might be necessary to reduce the number of tours in order to remain within the allocated budget.

25. Education outreach was receiving increasing emphasis, especially using the new technologies. The Department was working with academic institutions in the host country and the United Nations Association of the United States to reach out to teachers and was planning a seminar to familiarize teachers with United Nations issues, as well as a series of "Students' Days at the United Nations", to highlight special United Nations observances.

26. Efforts to provide practical training for media practitioners from developing countries continued. Eighteen participants had just completed the annual training programme. As part of the ongoing public information programme relating to the Middle East and the question of Palestine, the Department had intensified the training programme for Palestinian media practitioners begun last year. In 1996, 10 Palestinians had taken part in the programme, aimed at providing them with practical skills for the long-term benefit of their community. In addition, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was currently providing training in the use of the latest electronic resources to two officials of the Palestinian Authority. The Department was discussing further cost-effective activities, including an international forum in Gaza to review international assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

27. The free circulation of information was more essential than ever. With the advances in communication technologies, information was becoming an increasingly effective instrument to strengthen comprehension between peoples, forge public opinion and influence political will in the direction of peace, democratization and development. With the acceleration of international communications, freedom of information and of expression and a pluralist press were key foundations for a healthy society. The United Nations, through its Department of Public Information, was resolutely committed to furthering those concepts, as was demonstrated by a recent series of regional seminars. A seminar for the States of Central and Eastern Europe was under discussion for 1997.

28. More than 80 journalists had been killed in combat zones in 1995, and homage should be paid to those journalists dedicated to defending a free and pluralist press.

29. The effects of the financial constraints of the Organization had been particularly serious for the United Nations information centres, and an in-depth evaluation of the centres was being prepared. Many centres had confronted the financial crisis with professionalism and resourcefulness. They had implemented cost-saving measures on their own initiative, and staff had shown flexibility in taking on additional responsibilities. To encourage them, the Department had endeavoured to advance their computer capabilities, and over the past 12 months the number of centres with electronic mail had increased by 30 per cent. Information was also transmitted using compressed files which saved the centres both money and staff time.

30. The surge of new communications technologies harboured enormous potential for the information centres. By making the latest information readily available, they had greatly enhanced the quality of the information that the centres provided and the speed with which they delivered it, thereby strengthening their role. However, it was individuals who promoted an informed public understanding of the United Nations. The task required staff who were committed and innovative, who truly believed in the Organization and who could sense the local needs, acting as catalysts rather than simple couriers.

31. The performance and cost-effectiveness of each information centre had been examined. While many had made efforts to enhance the level of programme delivery and outreach, others, including some of those integrated with United Nations field offices, lagged behind. The Department would continue to pursue integration, on a case-by-case basis and in consultation with the host Governments, provided the stated goals of integration could be achieved while preserving the functional autonomy of the respective information centre.

32. Resources should be allocated where they would yield the best results; the Department had therefore intensified its ongoing review of the performance and output of all information centres, culminating in the evaluation that had been requested by the Committee on Information.

33. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library continued to expand and strengthen the role of the system of depository libraries in support of the United Nations public information activities. Five new libraries had been designated during the year, making a network of 356 libraries in 143 countries. Online indexing of United Nations documents had been initiated, and a shared indexing network with other United Nations libraries set up to ensure speedy access to United Nations information by users worldwide.

34. Reform, or cost-effective management, was currently under discussion; but reform was an ongoing process and the Department of Information had initiated it before the financial crisis. Reform signified the constant and dynamic harnessing of resources, and people were the most valuable resource.

35. The foregoing comments sought to highlight the major areas of new activity for the Department of Information and how they had been affected by financial constraint. However, other activities had also been affected; in fact, the provision of minimum services was becoming a daily challenge. Despite the difficulties, the Department was striving to fulfil the mandates received from

the General Assembly and looked forward to continuing to receive the guidance, encouragement and support of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee.

36. Mr. ALI MAHMOUD (Sudan) said that as the twenty-first century approached, State borders were being violated due to the development of unprecedented media techniques at a time of global interdependence. The third world countries, fearing the Western monopoly on information, called on the developed countries to help them establish a new world information and communication order that would be more honest, transparent and balanced, and would be achieved through the transfer of technology, the circulation of information in both directions and a cessation of the discriminatory use of information to perpetuate certain cultures and values. Sudan emphatically denounced the suspicious and misleading information campaigns being waged against it, depicting the conflicts in the country as religious or ethnic in origin and distorting Islam by linking it with terrorism. Credibility and objectivity would be the essential pillars of the new order, and a free flow of information would provide all countries with the opportunity for contact with the outside world.

37. The Department of Public Information had a major responsibility for acquainting the public with the activities of the United Nations. The United Nations Information Centre in Khartoum was doing commendable work. The information centres served a dual purpose: to acquaint people with United Nations activities and developments in the fields of peacekeeping and development, and also to reflect credibly and truthfully what was going on within the various countries, not focusing simply on their shortcomings but highlighting positive political and cultural developments. The Department of Public Information should, for instance, publicize the fact that the people of the Sudan had, in March, elected a President and a National Council, and that in April the Government had signed a peace agreement with two rebel factions.

38. The Sudan attached great importance to the programme on Palestine of the Committee on Information, and was confident that the Department of Public Information would do everything possible to implement the relevant provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/84 C. There was a need to enhance South-South cooperation in the field of information, and the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries was doing excellent work in resisting the monopoly of the Western media. The Department of Public Information was operating a valuable programme to train journalists in the developing countries and it deserved to be continued.

39. Mr. SILANI (Observer for Palestine) said that the rapid contemporary advances in communication and information technology were affecting all aspects of life, and the United Nations should use them to advantage. The availability of accurate and up-to-date information on the complexities of the question of Palestine and the situation in the Middle East could clearly help advance dialogue, understanding and support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and for the peace process in the region.

40. The Department of Public Information had an important role to play in furthering the Palestinian cause by continuing to educate the public about all aspects of the situation on the ground, as underscored in General Assembly resolution 50/84 C, which requested the Department to continue its special

information programme on the question of Palestine for the biennium 1996-1997, and specified the various components of that programme. The task of assisting the Palestinian people in the field of media development had been implemented, but the resolution as a whole had not, despite budgetary allocations for most of its provisions. The Secretariat should not use its own judgement in cutting funds for mandated programmes, and any Member State opposing such a programme should take the matter up with other Member States. The work of the Department of Public Information would not be done until peace was achieved in the Middle East.

41. Mr. ALMUDIR (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), noted the wide technological and information gap which existed between developed and developing countries, and expressed the hope that global information would serve as a positive and effective tool for strengthening human relationships and promoting cultural respect, rather than for stirring up hatred and misleading public opinion through failure to present the facts. As a means of liberal enlightenment, information was now the yardstick of progress, in which connection developing countries were disadvantaged by the enormous control exercised over the media by forces which tended to use such media for prejudicial purposes. The media of one particular country, for example, had distorted Libyan positions in a bid to impose alien choices on the Libyan people, who continued vehemently to reject all supremacy and outside interference in their country's internal affairs. Any positive attempts on the Libyan part to settle the matter of the so-called "Lockerbie disaster" had also been obscured by those same media, which similarly ignored all Libyan initiatives to settle various regional and international disputes. The harmful use of those media provided an instance of the political and economic effect which an unbalanced and biased media could have on small and developing countries. Bearing in mind that Western media allegations of Libyan terrorism had proved false, his delegation joined with those which had stressed the need to draw up a code of conduct concerning the media and information with a view to reinforcing the ground rules for fairness and impartiality and respect for the choices of peoples relating to lifestyle and to political, economic, social and cultural development.

42. In conclusion, he said that his delegation followed with serious interest the various publications issued by the Department of Public Information, which he hoped would devote more attention to implementing all aspects of the special information programme on the people of Palestine in accordance with General Assembly resolution 50/83 C. He also expressed appreciation for the efforts of the International Programme for the Development of Communication of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which he likewise urged to devote more attention to the development and enhancement of the media in developing countries.

43. Mrs. SAMATE (Burkina Faso) observed that despite the ending of the cold war, the imbalance and inequalities in the field of information and communications persisted. It was crucial to step up efforts to establish a new world information and communication order that would further economic and social development and environmental protection. The concentration of most of the media in just a few countries militated against the goal of a global village and of information highways open to all. It was therefore urgent to give developing countries access to technical innovations.

44. Burkina Faso supported the recommendations of the Committee on Information for the strengthening of the United Nations information centres, which had always played a major role in disseminating objective information on the purposes of the United Nations. The Information Centre in her capital, broadcasting in the three national languages on free radio and television using air time provided by her Government, had done an exemplary job of projecting a unified image of the United Nations system. The United Nations information centres deserved the support of the Department of Public Information in their valuable work.

45. Her delegation also supported the regional seminars for the promotion of independent and pluralistic media sponsored by the Department of Public Information in conjunction with UNESCO, and the Department's training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries.

46. Mrs. DENGO (Costa Rica), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, observed that the communications and information revolution underlay the accelerated economic liberalization, globalization and interdependence that marked the times. That revolution, more than any other, was tearing down the barriers and myths of the past, giving rise to an authentic universal sense of justice, equality and liberty.

47. She drew attention to the Final Declaration of the Fifth Conference of Ministers of Information of Non-Aligned Countries, held in Abuja, Nigeria, in September 1996 (A/51/372), and especially to section V on the use and application of modern technology by mass media in non-aligned countries. It was clear that developing countries were being left behind. Not only must modern technologies be made available to them but their personnel must be trained in their use, and the developing countries must exchange the experiences gained in the successful use of such technology.

48. Among the tasks before the Department of Public Information in the area of social development was its forthcoming coverage of the special session of the General Assembly in 1997 on the implementation of Agenda 21. The Department should do more to follow up on the implementation of all major United Nations conferences held since 1990. The Department's publication Development Update had, as indicated in the report of the Secretary-General on questions relating to information (A/51/406, para. 28) become a basic source of information on upcoming United Nations conferences as well as on the Organization's initiatives in areas linked to the needs of the developing world, and its inclusion in the Internet was a major step. Unfortunately, however, the Department had stopped issuing the press releases on decolonization issues, which, although they were being played down increasingly, should remain a United Nations priority.

49. With regard to the United Nations information centres, the recent integration and downsizing had not achieved the desired objective of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, but had reduced the capability of the centres to disseminate information about the United Nations that was of crucial importance to many developing countries. That policy should therefore be reviewed as soon as possible, and the independent status of the information centres should be restored. The Department of Public Information should consult with the host

countries as to their actual requirements, and any integration of information centres should be done in close consultation with them.

50. Regarding the proposed evaluation of the functioning of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, the Group of 77 and China believed that the independent consultant in question should be selected in consideration of the interests of all Member States and with participation by developing countries in the process.

51. With respect to the important question of Palestine, the Department of Public Information should focus on full implementation of the special information programme on the question of Palestine for the biennium 1996-1997 as specified in General Assembly resolution 50/84 C, and not simply the provision relating to the training of Palestinian media practitioners.

52. Mr. AL-AWADHI (Yemen) drew attention to the content of the third preambular paragraph and paragraph (e) of draft resolution A contained in part IV of the report of the Committee on Information (A/51/21), adding that action had also been adopted to support and devote attention to Palestinian matters and to implement the relevant resolutions in that respect. He emphasized the prominent role played by the Department of Public Information in publicizing the work of the United Nations in various fields and in promoting communication between its Member States and their peoples, particularly in the case of the developing countries, and said that various other organizations and individuals had equally benefited. With that in mind, he particularly regretted the fact that, due to the current financial constraints, the publications produced by the Department were no longer to be issued in the Arabic language. He hoped, however, that the Member States would provide the financial assistance needed to enable the Department to overcome those constraints with a view to the full exercise of its function of disseminating information.

53. His Government greatly appreciated the role of the Department, which, in the context of its activities aimed at promoting an independent and pluralistic media, had convened a seminar for the Arab region in Sana'a in January 1996. The seminar had ended successfully with the adoption of a declaration containing recommendations to promote freedom of the press, pluralism and diversity in the media of the Arab countries, a declaration which should be supported and implemented. He likewise stressed the importance of supporting regional information centres with a view to the effective performance of their role. The establishment of data banks was also important, as was the provision of technical advice and expertise in the field of computing and the creation of computer links with the outside world, the aim being to strengthen cultural and social cooperation between peoples and to eliminate barriers between them. His Government would double its efforts to ensure ongoing coordination between Yemeni information bodies, the Department of Public Information and the Sana'a Information Centre with a view to disseminating the message of the United Nations in line with international developments aimed at achieving a new world order where security, peace and stability prevailed.

54. Mr. KOZIY (Ukraine) said that despite criticism, most people believed in the United Nations and its ability to strengthen international peace, end conflicts and give fresh impetus to development in every sphere of human

activities. To achieve those goals, high-quality, objective information was of special importance, and, at a time when the United Nations was subject to criticism and scepticism, the Department of Public Information should be more action-oriented in protecting the Organization.

55. Despite the negative effect of the financial situation of the United Nations, as pointed out by the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information, great progress had been made in improving the work of the Department and innovating when implementing its programmes, thanks no doubt to its links with educational institutions, think tanks and national and local governmental institutions, as well as international media organizations. The information centres had done excellent work, and he underscored the effective and fruitful work of the United Nations Information Centre in Ukraine. The Department of Public Information should continue its intense activity to enhance the efficiency of the United Nations.

56. Ukraine was at a critical juncture as it marked the fifth anniversary of its independence. The Constitution adopted on 28 June 1996 guaranteed the right to freedom of speech and the right to choose, keep and disseminate information, which were prerequisites for real democracy. Serious economic difficulties were hindering modernization of its information network and access to the world information network, and the assistance of the developed countries, international institutions and the United Nations Department of Public Information was needed in order to enable it to acquire new technologies.

57. Use of new technologies by the United Nations network, especially in the developing countries and the countries with economies in transition, kept them abreast of recent developments, and promoted use of new technologies in those countries. In view of the global information revolution, it was extremely important to prevent a gap from forming in the informatics field between the developing countries, the countries in transition and the developed countries. His delegation therefore supported the holding of a UNESCO seminar on media for the States of Central and Eastern Europe in Bulgaria in 1997 and suggested that participation by the Department of Public Information would have a positive effect.

58. The opening for signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty on 24 September 1996 should be publicized by the Department of Public Information. He regretted that the Department had not been more responsive to and supportive of Ukraine's unprecedented contribution to nuclear disarmament and diminishing the global nuclear threat, which had not received adequate international recognition. He did, however, express satisfaction with the United Nations response to marking the tenth anniversary of the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Close cooperation between the Department of Public Information and the parties involved had created a precedent on how to do a good job with minimum expenditure, and he hoped that the Department of Public Information would continue to keep itself informed on that problem, which would remain a painful wound for his country for many years.

59. He welcomed the creation of an interdepartmental consultative mechanism to coordinate access to public information in peacekeeping and other missions. The importance of those missions should be given more attention in the countries of

conflict and in the countries contributors of personnel to avoid scepticism concerning those operations. Early use of the information component would help ensure the success of such operations.

60. Referring to the courage and professionalism of journalists reporting from zones of social and military conflict, he suggested that some legal instrument should be created to protect journalists with special emphasis on the responsibility of States in protecting the lives of journalists, so many of whom had been killed on assignment in the preceding year.

61. Mr. HOLOHAN (Ireland), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the associated countries of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and Iceland and Norway, said that freedom of information was essential to the promotion and preservation of democracy. It was the cornerstone from which many other freedoms flowed. Freedom of the press and the free and unhindered flow of information and ideas were basic prerequisites for several of the ideals enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. They played an important role in civil society, fostering mutual understanding and reconciliation while combating hatred, intolerance and discrimination. Any attempt to control the press, especially through the use of violence, must be condemned unreservedly wherever it occurred. He admired the efforts of journalists in some countries to fight for their right to express themselves freely, and drew attention with great sadness to the number of journalists who had paid with their lives in the preceding year simply for trying to report the news truthfully and without bias. At the same time, the media must be criticized when they used or was forced to use their great influence to incite to hatred, bigotry or racism. The broadcasts by the radio station "Mille Collines" in Rwanda during the genocide in that country two years before were an example of such behaviour, but such incitement to hatred or murder could happen anywhere, in an industrialized country just as easily as in a developing country, and could emanate from any religious or ethnic background. All branches of the news media everywhere must recognize their responsibilities and refuse to allow their great powers for moulding public opinion to be used for such purposes.

62. The European Union had always supported the Committee on Information and endorsed its recommendations, and he welcomed the report of the most recent meeting of that Committee held from 6 to 17 May 1996. He was confident that the Special Committee would endorse the recommendations submitted to it. He welcomed the report of the Secretary-General on Questions Relating to Information but regretted that although dated 2 October, it had been made available to delegations only in the preceding few days.

63. The modern United Nations was distinguished by the cooperative structure which existed between the developed and developing countries, and all countries needed to demonstrate a willingness to ensure the free and unrestricted flow of information to and between all parts of the world. It was therefore important that the draft resolutions of the Committee on Information be adopted by consensus, although that did not necessarily imply that all their provisions were endorsed unreservedly by the European Union; indeed, any language regarded as obsolete should be replaced, on the basis of consensus.

64. The importance of the information segment in vital United Nations peacekeeping missions, as well as in other United Nations activities, was often underestimated. Success or failure could depend on providing adequate information to the local population, so as to obtain their support and understanding, and to the world, since international public opinion often determined whether or not an operation received the necessary level of political and material resources. The UNOSOM operation in Somalia might have been more successful if it had been able to portray itself in a better light within Somalia and to the world at large. Better information could have spared the Organization a damaging loss of prestige and international credibility. Successes with radio and other communications media in both Cambodia and Angola demonstrated the considerable benefits which could derive from the well-orchestrated dissemination of information. Information activities should therefore be given considerable prominence in all peacekeeping operations through coordinated action involving all the relevant departments and specialized agencies. In fulfilling its mandate of providing assistance to the Palestinian people in the field of media development, the Department of Public Information should concentrate on ensuring the provision of fast, unbiased and, above all, accurate news and information to the Palestinian people.

65. He gave full credit to the Department of Public Information for its effectiveness and professionalism during a difficult financial situation. Its work was especially important at a time when the need to project a positive image of the United Nations to world public opinion had never been greater. The Department should concentrate its resources on those activities to which priority was assigned in draft resolution B before the Committee. He was pleased at the progress in modernization through use of the Internet and the optical disk system, taking into account the linguistic diversity of the Organization, and commended the Department for its prompt publication of press releases.

66. New technology could perhaps assist the Department of Public Information in coping with budgetary constraints, and he therefore supported a thorough evaluation of the United Nations information centres network and the Dag Hammarskjöld Library so that they would be able to spread United Nations-related information in the most efficient possible manner. The Department must adapt to the new information environment, constantly evaluate its goals and use its budget and human resources to achieve the best possible results. Regular meetings between the Assistant Secretary-General and the Extended Bureau of the Committee on Information were an excellent step, and he invited the Department of Public Information to have regular exchanges with the President of the United Nations Correspondents' Association in order to find an appropriate balance between the needs of journalists and the services provided by the Department and the Spokesman's Office.

67. He expressed his appreciation to the Guided Tours Unit, which continued to do excellent work in promoting the United Nations among visitors to New York, and hoped that every facility would be provided to the tours to allow them access to as much of the Headquarters building as possible, including the General Assembly and Security Council chambers, even when meetings were in session.

68. In concluding, he wished to put on the record his delegation's view that the Assistant Secretary-General and his colleagues in the Department of Public Information deserved great praise for their untiring efforts in strengthening the image of the United Nations and for the high professional standards which they had at all times maintained in the performance of their duties.

69. Ms. PASUPATHI (Singapore) said that information technology was changing the world, transforming the way States interacted and redefining the global economy and the very notions of wealth and resources. Mastering the new information technology was the key to prosperity and growth in the twenty-first century.

70. That technology also posed political, moral and social challenges. Traditionally, families were responsible for the education and moral development of their children and Governments were given legitimacy through periodic free elections which also made them responsible for their actions. The information revolution had allowed the media to impinge into and profoundly influence those areas, but the media did not have the responsibility for outcomes assumed by families and democratic Governments. The fundamental purpose of media-based industries was profit, which had, more often than not, led the media to pander to the lowest common denominator; the media had influence without responsibility. That problem had first been posed by the development of globally distributed international print media, then in a starker form by satellite television and in an even sharper way by the Internet.

71. Coping with that problem did not imply a simplistic choice between total freedom of information or complete censorship. Access to information did not mean surrendering the right to live in one's own society as one deemed fit, or total surrender to a market that bore no responsibility for the influence it could have. Abstract philosophical arguments for freedom of information should not be an excuse to blur the distinction between right and wrong. Precisely because information could have such a profound influence on the political, social and moral development of societies, it was vital that societies set benchmarks for what was unacceptable and define the parameters of the acceptable.

72. The key to the prosperity of Singapore, as a small and open country whose only resource was its people, was instantaneous access to new information. But for a small, multiracial and multi-religious nation like Singapore, that information brought with it its own vulnerabilities. The Government had not abdicated its responsibility and had set clear benchmarks and parameters for the international media and for satellite broadcasting. The Internet had tremendous potential, and she applauded the efforts made by the Secretariat and the Department of Public Information to harness that technology for disseminating United Nations information. However, the Internet was also infested with violence, pornography, sexual perversion and hate, as all countries were beginning to realize. Singapore had one of the highest penetration rates for Internet access in the world, and by the year 2000 the country would be fully networked, within a regulatory framework that introduced elements of responsibility and accountability to check abuse. Internet operators and content providers were licensed, and laws applicable to print and broadcast media were extended as much as possible to cyberspace. Some obviously undesirable sites had been blocked. The objective was not to stifle development

of the Internet, but to curb content that undermined public laws, political stability and religious harmony. That was a daunting task. Technology always moved ahead of any regulatory framework, but it was the fundamental duty of Governments to assume their responsibility in setting basic parameters for right and wrong.

73. Many other countries faced similar problems and were looking into ways to regulate the Internet. Concerted action by the world community could bring about a degree of law and order in response to that moral challenge; practical and intelligent regulation without impeding information access was necessary to attain a wholesome society. Though some might regard that as an unwelcome curb on personal liberties, she believed it to be a necessary safeguard which enabled her countrymen as a whole to enjoy greater freedom, security and a safer environment.

74. Mr. WANG Xuexian (China) concurred with the statement made by Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and said that the Department of Public Information had overcome shortfalls in resources and played an important role in enhancing public understanding of the United Nations and promoting public awareness of peace and development, making use of both traditional and modern media.

75. The communications revolution had brought with it new opportunities and new challenges. The media, as carriers of information, were becoming an important factor in political, social, economic and security development. The international community and the United Nations must decide how to use the media to facilitate settlement of mankind's common problems and promote social development in the post-cold-war area.

76. Cold-war attitudes had not, however, died, since there were those who manipulated the mass media under the pretence of freedom of information, in violation of the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, and established the so-called free radios to peddle clichés that smacked of the cold war. They tried to paint a negative picture of the developing countries, impose their own values on other countries and interfere with their internal affairs in an attempt to subvert the political systems and legitimate Governments of other countries. They shamelessly practised double standards, imposing their own preferences on public opinion and attacking other countries which interfered with their global strategy by seizing upon one point and ignoring the overall picture, while turning a blind eye to their own problems. What they called freedom of information was actually freedom of submission. Their opponents were presented as autocracies or dictatorships and threatened because they had different ideologies.

77. Such actions must be resisted, and the public media must not be used to trample on international laws and norms governing international relationships. The international community must work to ensure that the media respected the principles of objectivity, fairness and respect for cultural diversity.

78. An imbalance existed in the field of information because developing countries generally risked being marginalized due to lack of access to new technologies; the developed countries were therefore duty bound to provide

financial resources and transfer technology to developing countries to help improve their communication infrastructure and thereby accelerate a two-way flow of information for the achievement of mutual understanding and harmony. Although the information superhighway did indeed promote political, social and economic development, many countries, especially the developing countries, had benefited very little from such advanced technologies. The information superhighway should help narrow the distance between countries rather than exaggerate the disparity between North and South. A code of conduct relating to the information superhighway needed to be formulated in order to prevent one point of view from dominating, and at the same time the various traditional means of communication needed to be maintained.

79. The vitality of the Chinese language had contributed to the continuation of Chinese culture for 5,000 years, and more than one fifth of the world's population spoke Chinese. Despite the financial crisis confronting the United Nations, the status of Chinese should not be weakened, and he hoped that the Department of Public Information would increase the number and dissemination of publications in Chinese.

80. He was convinced that by seizing the opportunity provided by the information technology revolution, while at the same time properly meeting its challenges, mankind would be able to march into a much better twenty-first century hand-in-hand.

81. Mr. DOULECH (Tunisia) said that his delegation supported the statement made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

82. His delegation commended the Department of Public Information for integrating advanced information technologies and improving its working methods. It welcomed the establishment of a working group on public information activities of the United Nations, the reports of which should be made available to Member States. In order to enhance the effectiveness of the information activities of the United Nations, particular attention should be paid to the need for coordination between the Department and all other actors which could assist it in its tasks or needed its help. The Interdepartmental Working Group on Media Strategies for Peacekeeping and other Field Operations had an important role to play. Information activities to publicize the objectives and principles of peacekeeping operations should be strengthened not only in the host countries but everywhere else, so as to maintain the support of international public opinion. The Department of Public Information had much to do in that respect, and in particular should strengthen its activities in the context of its partnership agreements with local media.

83. The Department's efforts to make better use of available resources should not be carried out in a discriminatory manner, at the expense of certain programmes. No justification had been given to explain the cuts in programmes on the question of Palestine, and no explanation could be acceptable as long as that question remained unresolved. Programmes recommended by States Members could not be eliminated without prior consultation with them.

84. Budgetary reductions were liable to affect vital activities, such as those of the United Nations information centres. His delegation hoped that the report

called for in paragraph 15 of draft resolution B would enable the Department to supervise the activities of the centres more effectively and provide them with the support they needed. New technology should be made available to all centres. In the absence of adequate international cooperation in the transfer of technology, the gap between developing and industrialized countries would continue to widen, thereby preventing many developing countries from gaining the benefits of information disseminated through sophisticated means. International cooperation within a partnership framework should be further explored. The United Nations could play a significant role, particularly in training broadcasters and journalists.

85. The work of the Committee on Information at its eighteenth session had shown the importance of international cooperation for the promotion of United Nations activities in the dissemination of information with a view to a better image of the Organization in world public opinion.

86. Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) said that the greatest challenge facing the United Nations, especially at a time when its ability to deliver was being widely questioned, was to communicate and convince the people of the world about its purpose and the outcome of its efforts. His delegation commended the work of the Department of Public Information in bringing out useful publications and harnessing new information technologies in pursuit of its mandate. In that exercise, however, competence and competitiveness should be the guiding principles. Resources must be used effectively to optimize output. Priorities must be set, and the main purpose of streamlining must be to make the Department efficient and effective, not to throttle its functions.

87. As a major contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations round the globe, Bangladesh believed that it was essential to keep people informed about such operations. Increased information also needed to be disseminated on economic and social issues, in line with the enhanced role of the United Nations in those areas following the recent major global conferences, and on human rights issues. His delegation would be interested in knowing what percentage of the Department's resources was used to cover the economic and social activities of the United Nations. For developing countries, it was useful to receive information on success stories, particularly in the areas of child survival and development, the empowerment of women and the implementation of new concepts of non-formal education through non-governmental organizations. His delegation appreciated the training programmes for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries.

88. The United Nations information centres could effectively provide a multiplier effect to the efforts of the United Nations on key issues. Unfortunately, there had been a significant reduction in the effectiveness of the Information Centre in Dhaka following its integration with UNDP. The integration process had not been successful in producing the desired focus and outcome. Bangladesh strongly felt that the independent status of major information centres should be maintained and where necessary restored, and expected the Department of Public Information to take urgent action in respect of the Centre in Dhaka and nominate a director for the Centre.

89. Bangladesh attached the highest priority to freedom of speech and the media, in the belief that democracy, development and peace were integrally related and that the free flow of information was an essential component of democracy. His Government had taken steps to give the national radio and television networks functional autonomy, and would welcome support from the Department of Public Information and UNESCO in improving its information-related infrastructures, particularly in training facilities and appropriate technology. His delegation endorsed the views expressed by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77, including their support for the issue of reactivation of the United Nations information centres.

90. Mr. MAXIMOV (Bulgaria) said that his delegation fully supported the statement made by the representative of Ireland on behalf of the European Union and associated countries.

91. His Government constantly endeavoured to enhance the implementation of the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights and freedoms pertaining to the obtaining and disseminating of information, freedom of expression and opinion, and had established the necessary conditions for diversifying the mass media and converting to a multimedia system based on democratic freedoms and universal values. Bulgaria was experiencing unprecedented difficulties, most of which could not be solved without outside assistance. Bearing in mind the role of information and communications in the promotion of democracy and prosperity and of understanding and confidence among peoples and States, Bulgaria was actively involved in developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation at the regional and international levels, which it believed should be one of the priorities in the process of preparation of the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe for full membership in the European Union.

92. Progress in the field of information and communications technologies had become a factor for uniting the world, but could also divide it. The establishment of a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order would be beneficial to all nations, and Bulgaria shared the view that all nations should be guaranteed access to the information flow and cultural achievements of mankind. His delegation felt that the United Nations public information strategy should be directed at guaranteeing such access by all Member States, thereby promoting the Organization's central mission for world peace, democracy and sustainable development and gaining public support for the activities of the Organization.

93. United Nations public information must be objective and accurate, modern in form and audience-targeted. The work of the Department of Public Information in enhancing coordination and avoiding duplication had become crucial in presenting a unified image of the United Nations at a time of budgetary crisis. However, his delegation was concerned that demands for further cost savings by the Department could significantly reduce its ability to shape the image of the Organization.

94. The eighteenth session of the Committee on Information had confirmed the importance attached by Member States to the role of information and communications in the new technological age and to the mandate of that Committee, which had adopted substantial, well-targeted and action-oriented

recommendations that would give the Department of Public Information the necessary guidance to respond appropriately to the new realities and requirements facing the Organization.

95. His delegation commended the positive role of the information structures of the United Nations in contributing to the processes of democratization in the newly emerging independent States and the countries in transition. Bulgaria attached importance to the training programmes for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries, the regional seminars for the promotion of independent and pluralistic media, and the activities of the United Nations information centres.

96. His Government was pleased that on 19 October 1996, a United Nations information component of the UNDP Sofia Office had been opened in the National Library of Bulgaria, and was gratified that its offer to host a regional seminar on the promotion of independent and pluralistic media for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was supported by the Committee on Information and reflected in paragraph 28 of draft resolution B.

97. Mr. MARTINSEN (Argentina) said that it was vitally important that all member countries should have accurate and objective information about the activities of the United Nations, and that the misconceptions which frequently arose regarding the work of the United Nations should be corrected. His delegation welcomed the establishment of the media response team to monitor news about the United Nations, which would make it possible to respond promptly to any distortions about United Nations activities. Full use of all the information outlets of the United Nations would have a decisive impact on the image projected by the Organization.

98. In establishing priorities with regard to the geographical regions to which information was transmitted, there could be no discrimination against any particular region. The Latin American and Caribbean region should receive programmes through the integrated system of digital network lines referred to in paragraph 18 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/51/406). United Nations radio productions in Spanish were of immense importance for Argentina and Latin America in general; resources allocated to Spanish radio productions should make it possible to continue the operations on an equal footing with radio operations in other official languages of the United Nations.

99. With regard to the United Nations information centres, any measures adopted to cut costs must preserve their autonomy, take into account the views of the host country, and seek savings through technological advances. The United Nations should continue to increase both the quality and the quantity of material provided to the mass media, and ensure that it was prepared carefully so as to avoid errors.

100. His delegation commended the work of the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General in cooperating not only with accredited press offices but also with delegations of Member States.

101. In order to maintain the effectiveness of the Committee on Information, its members should keep in mind the budgetary crisis of the Organization, avoid

reintroducing old initiatives and adjust new initiatives to the resources available.

102. Mr. HAMDAN (Lebanon) said that information was an important means for political, economic and social development. However, it must be accurate, objective and respectful of cultural diversity, otherwise it could become a tool for negative propaganda. His delegation supported the idea of an international code of conduct relating to flows of information. It believed that when the mission of the United Nations was better understood, the Organization would gain the universal support it deserved. That meant that United Nations information must be disseminated at the country level in national languages, and that emphasis should be placed on addressing public opinion in donor countries where the public was still reluctant to support official development assistance programmes.

103. His delegation shared the concerns expressed by the Committee on Information about proposals for further reductions of the budget of the Department of Public Information, which would negatively affect its activities. It urged the Department to keep its priority focus on development, as the primary key to maintaining international peace and security.

104. His delegation welcomed the seminar for journalists from the Arab region held in Sana'a in January 1996, and took note of the declaration adopted.

105. His delegation subscribed to the Final Declaration of the Fifth Conference of Ministers of Information of Non-Aligned Countries held in Abuja, Nigeria, in September 1996, and supported a new world information and communication order based on the principles of independence, progress, democracy and mutual cooperation. It remained necessary to ensure the diversity of sources and free access to information to allow developing countries to disseminate information and communicate their views, and to increase assistance for the development of communication infrastructures and capabilities in developing countries. An advanced information structure was a key to economic and cultural success; his Government had therefore prioritized rehabilitation of the communications system.

106. His delegation believed that integration between the United Nations information centres and other field offices of the United Nations system should continue on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the views of host Governments, functional autonomy, the effectiveness of the centres and the imperative of cost savings. His Government paid tribute to the United Nations Information Centre in Beirut, which had remained open throughout the war; it remained committed to working closely with the Department of Public Information to ensure the effective functioning of the Centre, and would be providing new premises within a United Nations complex to be completed in 1997.

107. His delegation commended the Department for setting up a United Nations home page on the World Wide Web. It welcomed the focus by the Joint United Nations Information Committee on issues that spoke to people's needs. It was encouraged by the establishment of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Media Strategies for Peacekeeping and other Field Operations, and welcomed the relations established between the Department and non-governmental organizations.

108. His delegation supported the activities by the Department on the question of Palestine, but believed that the flexibility required by General Assembly resolution 50/84 C did not entail any change in the organizational structure of the Department. No change should be made without prior explicit decision by the General Assembly. His delegation also welcomed the programmes in support of the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.